

TELEWORKING IN ROMANIAN SMEs AFTER COVID-19 PANDEMIC

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Abstract

The COVID-19 pandemic and all the circulation restrictions that came with it changed our lives forever. In the 21st century, the century of speed, technology, and information, the mandatory self-isolation and quarantine irremediably changed our perception of our lives and on the way we want to live them. These restrictions have also hurried the changes that would have eventually come anyway and that took decades in the past. The Industrial Revolution took the world from the agricultural economy to the industrial one, then it came the transition from the industrial age to the information age, and now, the era when humans are replacing almost everything with its virtual correspondent. Although telecommuting is not a new concept, as it was coined in 1994 by Nilles, for many years there was resistance to it both from employers and employees. In the latest years, due to technology's immense evolution and due to the increased need for flexibility of the now working millennials, teleworking has known an increased appreciation in the work market and got from being considered an informal bonus to being incorporated in Romanian legislation, since 2018. This article has set the objective to analyze the Romanian Classification of Activities in the National Economy (CAEN) to find out which domains are preferred by Romanian SMEs and which of these economic sectors are more susceptible to implementing day to day teleworking. After selecting the statistically relevant data to find out the spread of SMEs in each economic sector, an empirical analysis of every domain will be complemented by the results of a survey to verify the applicability of telecommuting in Romanian SMEs after the Coronavirus pandemic.

Keywords

COVID-19 pandemic, teleworking, SMEs, restrictions, change, opportunities

Introduction

After a few months of the COVID-19 pandemic, still little is known about this deadly virus, and experts from all countries and specialties are constantly analyzing the current situation as it develops rather unpredictably.

As can be seen below (Figure 1), the official World Health Organization (WHO) timeline shows that on 31 December 2019 “a pneumonia of unknown cause” in Wuhan, China was

reported to WHO in China. Only on 30 January 2020 it was announced a Public Health Emergency of International Concern that received a name on 11 February 2020: COVID-19. (World Health Organization, 2020)



Figure 1. World Health Organization COVID-19 Timeline
Authors' representation of WHO Timeline - COVID-19

In parallel with the response of WHO to the COVID-19 pandemic, EU Council took its own actions. First, after WHO raised the concern of a highly transmissible disease, EU Council activated the information-sharing mode for the EU's Integrated Political Crisis Response Mechanism (IPCR). Based on the discussions WHO had on 11-12 February, on 13 February, the Extraordinary Health Council formulates some conclusions on COVID-19. Implications on the economy are discussed by Eurogroup on 4 March.

After COVID-19 is declared a pandemic on 11 March, the EU Council approves the decision to support countries in need from the EU budget on 18 March, on 19 March social and employment implications are discussed, on 23 March, EU fiscal rules are eased and on 30 March measures for the release of cohesion funds are adopted. (World Health Organization, 2020)

In April large sums were put together as a global crisis response package: development ministries put forward €20 billion on 8 April, Eurogroup launch €500 billion on 9 April and EU €3.1 billion on 14 April. In April are discussed COVID-19 impact on the tourism sector, on energy, on home affairs and transportation.

A political agreement is reached in the Council on 15 May, regarding a safety net for employees and on 19 May a temporary scheme is adopted to support workers and a special discussion targets the creative sector.

On 9 June the elasticity of the labor market in the recovery phase was the main subject of interest, and a few of the solutions discussed regard flexible working program, remote work and innovative technology, upskilling and/ or reskilling, protection of vulnerable groups. (European Council, 2020)

Vesna Bedeković, the Croatian Minister for Demography, Family, Youth and Social Policy said during the video conference of employment and social affairs ministers of 9 June that *“In these challenging times, nurses, healthcare and social workers, and informal care workers, most of whom are women, have been on the frontline. In this situation, the issue of gender equality becomes even more challenging. Our discussion today showed that, in order to recover from the crisis, we need adequate policies to tackle long-term problems, such as the unequal distribution of care responsibilities and the gender pay gap.”* (European Council, 2020)

Teleworking

Through the measures proposed to maintain and even enhance the resilience of the labor market during and after the COVID-19 pandemic, teleworking is the most popular, as it helps both the businesses and the workers to continue their activity in the safest of conditions.

The huge technological advances and the fact that technology is well integrated into our day-to-day lives, so that almost everyone own at least a PC, if not a laptop, making it very easy to make this transition. Also, many people were already used to this concept as: (1) it is not new, but coined in 1994 by Nilles, and (2) companies were already promoting it as a benefit.

As the Croatian Minister for the Sea, Transport and Infrastructure, Oleg Butković said in a press release, *“The COVID-19 pandemic and its consequences on our lives and economies have highlighted the importance of digitization across all areas of the economy and society in the EU. New technologies have helped us all to stay connected, to work from our homes, and to facilitate our children’s distance learning. They have been instrumental in keeping our businesses and public services running. The digital transformation will not only help address the current health crisis, but will also be a key engine for economic recovery, green growth and the strategic autonomy of the EU.”* (European Council, 2020)

Telecommuting has at least 3 versions, depending on the location where the employee works, and they have very different implications from other points of view as well. Street work refers to situations when the worker has to work while traveling or in a public place, with nothing more than access to the Internet and a mobile device. Of course, this form of telecommuting is not suitable for any kind of job as it raises high cybersecurity concerns. Satellite center is a specific form of telecommuting that is applicable mostly when the employees are supposed to work on other premises that are established by the employer. Again, not many jobs are suitable for this kind of telework. Home offices, the last of the 3 versions presented, were the most popular during the COVID-19 pandemic, as it is suitable to many activity sectors like information and communications, real estate transactions, retail, professional, scientific and technical activities, administrative and support service activities, etc. Of course, teleworking also implies higher risks when it comes to sensitive information, cybersecurity, etc. so the European

Cybersecurity Competence Centre and the Network of Coordination Centers in collaboration with other institutions, helped shape Europe's digital future by deciding to use a written procedure. (European Council, 2020)

Teleworking in Romania

The Ministry of Labor and Social Protection from Romania has recommended 3 measures to increase the flexibility of working relations: telework, work from home, or individualizes work programs. When the activity sector allowed it, the main response of companies to the Coronavirus pandemic was to ask their employees either to work from home on an undetermined period, either to telework and/ or to take a few days off each month.

In Romania, work from home is regulated by Law no. 53/ 2003, art. 108-110, which states that the specificity of this kind of work consists of the location of the worker, which is no longer the employer perimeter, but the employee's home or residence. Teleworking is regulated by another Law, no. 81/ 2018, art. 2, lit. a) and it describes it as "*the form of work organization through which the employee, regularly and voluntarily, fulfills his attributions specific to the position, occupation or profession he holds, in another place than the work organized by the employer, at least one day a month, using information and communication technology.*" (Monitorul Oficial Partea I nr. 296, 2018)

The 2 forms of telecommuting are often getting confused, but have both similarities and differences.

Working from home and telework share the fact that they do not use the employer's premises, the activity can be done from home, it's the employer obligation to make sure that the worker has everything needed to perform his/ her job – training, documents, etc., there is a certain schedule when the employer can control employees' activity.

The differences are first of all of the legal sources, as the two concepts are regulated by different laws: work from home by the art. 109 of the Labor Code and telework by the Law no. 81/2018. In addition, *teleworker* is a specific qualification, as opposed to working from home employees; the teleworkers are using specific technologies and the one who works from home use classic installations; telework is also defined by specific activities like programmers or computer scientist, while work from home can be attributed to a wider range of business activities, like accounting or tailoring.

While working from home is by definition done *at home* and it does not have a strict working schedule, teleworking is possible in any other location, but within a strict program. Also, in normal conditions, working from home is permanent, while telework implies a specific period. (Dumitrescu & Capus , 2020)

Methodology

The object of this research is teleworking in Romanian SMEs and the research question regards its evolution during and after the COVID-19 pandemic. In order to verify the research hypotheses that after the COVID-19 pandemic restrictions are lifted workers will tend to ask their employers to allow them to use teleworking more often, there were

used 2 scientific methods. First, qualitative data analysis to find out for how many of the Romanian SMEs is teleworking applicable; then, a survey, to see if indeed there is a demand for this type of work style.

Analysis of statistical data

The last available statistical data regarding the Romanian SMEs' important indicators and distribution according to the classification of economic activities (National Institute of Statistics, 2017) was used as a reference point for this research. The statistical data was analyzed in two ways: first, regarding the distribution of Romanian SMEs in the economic sectors and second, regarding their importance in terms of the number of employees, fiscal value, and net investment.

Survey

The objective of the survey was to find out if employees from various companies and with different backgrounds believe that teleworking will be a valid option when the restrictions will be lifted.

Although at the moment only 83.33% of the 42 interviewed people are currently in a teleworking position, they answered 20 questions about the benefits and disadvantages of telework, from their point of view as people that have worked from home in the past occasionally and that have worked every day from home for the past 2 months due to the COVID-19 pandemic.

Apart from this common ground that was important to have relevant results, from people who know what it is like to be in both situations (telework as a benefit and as status quo), the respondents have many differences.

Research and results

SMEs are often described as the economy's backbone by many European and non-European countries often providing 2 out of 3 workplaces, offering training opportunities and other benefits, not being a constraint to a certain area rural or urban. This is why they are the subject of the current research and interest for many researchers and institutions, and why they remained so even during the COVID-19 pandemic.

This is the reason why the European Council elaborated a 3 pillar strategy to support them. The first and most important pillar in this time of crisis is assisting the rapid metamorphosis toward sustainable, digitalized companies. The second, crucial to the survival of SMEs from the economic crisis point of view, is reducing the bureaucratic burden and enhancing market access. The third pillar is an old initiative, an old concern of the EU Council – improving access to finance.

According to the Report from the Working Group Meeting on Access to Finance held on 21 February 2018 in Brussels, Belgium by the Digital Innovation Hubs Working Group 1, "*while 54% of large companies are highly digitized, only 17% of SMEs have successfully integrated digital technologies into their businesses*". The same report shows that there

are a variety of reasons why companies do not finance digital technology and also why this is a very harmful practice when it comes to competitiveness at the global level. (Working Group on Digital Innovation Centers, 2018)

EU Commission proposed a set of key actions to help European SMEs in their attempt to become more and more sustainable, technology forward, green:

- EU Commission will inject funds of a minimum of 300 million EUR for green innovations;
- Enterprise Europe Network will get modernized to become sustainable;
- Artificial Intelligence, blockchain technology, cyber-security will all be taught to SMEs employees through intensive courses;
- Innovation in education and training is also a desirable objective;
- Startup Europe initiative will be completed by centers of digital innovation. (European Commission, 2020)

Between the years 2015 and 2017, the number of SMEs in each of the economic sectors remained steady, except for the services sector, where the numbers grew by around 10,000 each year. In 2019, the numbers got over 700,000 companies in Romania, and in 2018 for the first time, the total turnover in the economy exceeded 1,500 billion lei. The service sector is also the largest of the 7 analyzed in terms of the number of companies, followed closely by the commerce sector.

If we group the organizations by branches of activity, the SMEs sample has the following structure: 31.81% of companies are industrial, 30.32% of companies belong to the trade sector, 29.25% of economic units operate in services, 4.72% of enterprises carry out its activity in transports and 3.91% of the entities are from constructions. Many of the economic agents target several fields of activity because they focus on identifying and capitalizing on business opportunities, which is a basic feature of SMEs both in Romania and in other countries. (Consiliul National al Intreprinderilor Private Mici si Mijlocii din Romania, 2019)

Out of the 7 main Romanian private economic sectors, the leading 2 are also the ones most susceptible to apply teleworking during and even after the COVID-19 pandemic is over. The survey was completed by 42 employees who have worked from home before, that during the COVID-19 pandemic have worked only from home and that have now been presented to the perspective to permanently telework. The respondents said that in the period before the COVID-19 pandemic, they would take home some of their work 50% never, 50% sometimes and 0% always.

Regarding their position, 40% have non-management roles and 60% are managers. They have to travel to work for various distances, but most of them work a maximum of 20 kilometers away from their homes. (Figure 2) In Figure 2, found below, we can see the various distances employees have to cross to come to work; it is important to point out that 40.48% of the people who answered the survey said they drive alone to work and 28.57% of those do it 5 days per week. Also, 19.05% are carpooling, 35.71% take public transportation and only 4.76% are walking to work.

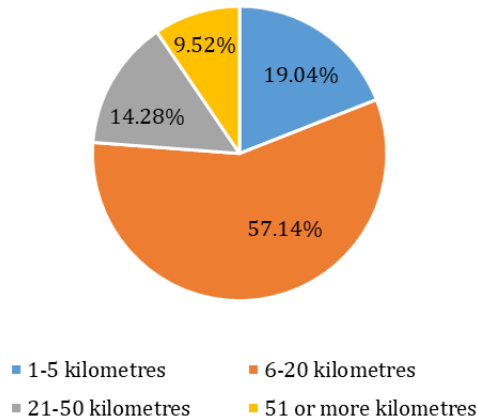


Figure 2. Home to work distance
Authors' representation

Reducing commutes, eliminating business trips, reorganizing necessary trips in order to get accomplished more in one outing and other consequences of COVID-19 pandemic restrictions, helped workers all over the world to use their time efficiently and to gain at least a couple of hours per week to be spent in any other way but in traffic.

On the positive side, we can find as well a significantly smaller carbon footprint, very low levels of air and water pollution (by comparison to the previous year), an important decrease of fossil fuels usage (fallen by 2.5 billion metric tons), etc. (Breland, 2020)

Other important events of the last 100 years like the Spanish flu (1918), the Great Depression (1929-1933), the end of World War II (1945), the First (1973) and Second (1979) Oil Crisis, the dissolution of the Soviet Union (1991), the financial crisis of 2008, all caused significant drops in the global CO₂ emissions, but nothing like the COVID-19 pandemic when it got smaller with about one billion tones. (McGrath, 2020)

When asked which if any office equipment do they have in their homes, their answers were not at all surprising. If next to the *computer/ laptop* variable it would have been also the *tablet* option, the results could have arguably been 100%. (Figure 3)

The *modem* variable in Figure 2 got 100% of the answers because all the interviewed employees live in urban areas in flat buildings and it is the most common option to provide access to landline internet. *Microsoft Office* got many answers (83.33%) but not all, because Linux became very wanted in Romania in the latest years, as it is advertised as being superior, and it has its suite of desktop productivity applications.

Many Romanians have printers (66.66%), but because most of them are not for professional use, only 40.47% have also the function of a copy machine. (Figure 2)

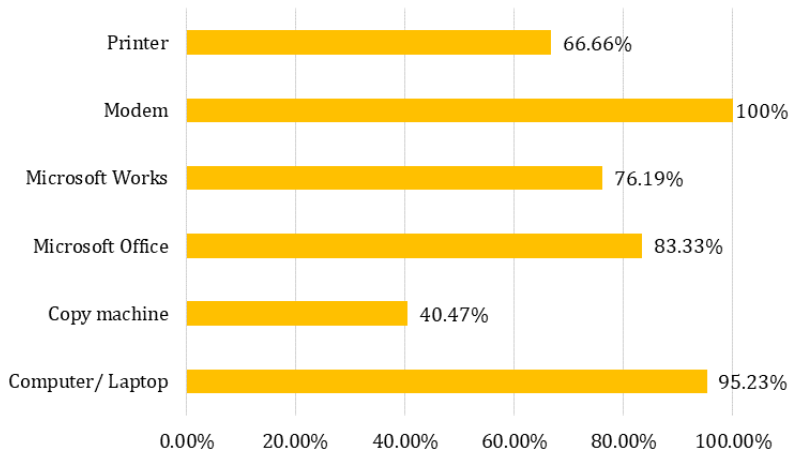


Figure 3. Most common office equipment employees have at home
Authors' representation

When asked to which extent teleworking has helped them to spend time on their objectives and tasks, most of the interviewed people answered positively (65%) and only one person answered that they strongly disagree with this sentence. (Figure 4)

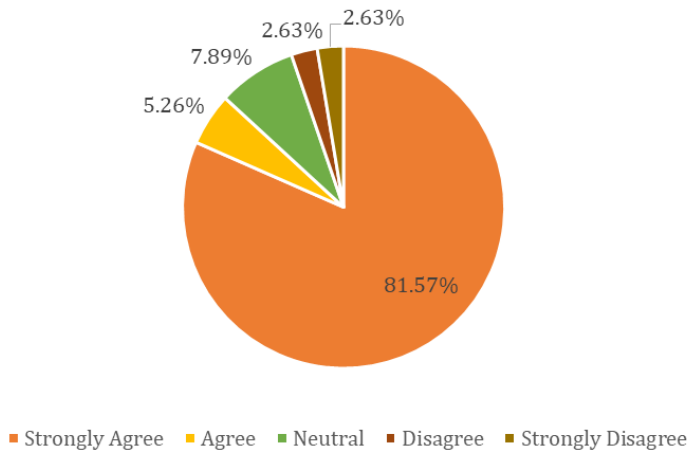


Figure 4. Telecommuting has helped to spend time on objectives and tasks
Authors' representation

According to the Romanian economic activities sectors, commerce is split into 3 categories: Wholesale and retail trade, maintenance and repair of motor vehicles and motorcycles, Wholesale trade, except motor vehicles and motorcycles and retail trade, except motor vehicles and motorcycles. All of the 3 can be done online to some extent and this is why all three got analyzed.

When it comes to other important economic indicators, commerce is in second place after an unfair opponent, the services category, which gathers a diverse palette of activities under the same name.

In commerce are working over 720 thousand Romanian and gathered a bit over 353 thousand million lei each year in fiscal value. The businesses that activate in commerce gathered these numbers with a medium yearly investment of only 7 million lei.

Of course, the proportions in the number of employees, fiscal value, and net investment indicators are mainly the same as in the number of companies and the Retail trade, except motor vehicles and motorcycles is the lead, leaving Wholesale and retail trade, maintenance and repair of motor vehicles and motorcycles, on the last place, although they run with bigger numbers.

The other important economic sector where teleworking is mainly applicable, is named pretty generically – services. In Romania, this sector has a vast structure, containing 10 categories of diverse activities, each with its specifics from multiple points of view. Of course, not all of these categories are equally susceptible to implement teleworking permanently after the COVID-19 pandemic is over.

Arriving so soon after the 2008 economic crisis, the COVID-19 pandemic made everyone think about liquidities, even the population with some to no economic education. This is why, especially in the first part of the pandemic, many services were considered a luxury and were cut off.

Even so, the businessman got inventive. Hair and nail salons started to sell kits and to make online tutorials on how to do everything at home, by yourself. Film production activities, audio recordings, and music editing got also moved on-line and created popular feature films (*9 love and hate stories* a film by Dan Chişu) and songs (*Bored in the House* by Tyga). Virtual museums gained more popularity with the help of phone apps; even tourism made the best of the advance in technology by starting to sell virtual reality trips in places all over the world.

During an Extraordinary G20 Tourism Ministers' Meeting, held on 24 April 2020, Guy Ryder, International Labor Organization (ILO) Director-General said that *"The immediate imperative is to assure the survival of tourism enterprises through the large-scale public support without which they will disappear before the virus does. And that support must extend to the workers concerned who would otherwise have no income or social protection"*. (International Labor Organization, 2020)

The global efforts made in the try to contain the COVID-19 pandemic affected directly international tourism that dropped by 45% and up to 70%. Although domestic tourism industries are likely to recover faster, it got hit just as hard while the restrictions were the most severe, as almost 50% of the world's population was estimative constrained.

Educators and schools have been inventive in receiving an assortment of innovation-based systems as options in contrast to the customary homeroom, giving exercises through videoconferencing and on the web learning stages and sharing learning materials also, worksheets through school-based intranets, and informing stages. In certain nations radio projects and national TV are being utilized to communicate school exercises and instructive materials, especially in under-resourced zones that might be ailing in an innovative framework. (International Labor Organization, 2020)

Professional support and training, occupational safety and health, employment and working conditions, social dialogue, are all aspects to be considered when talking about the education sector, even the private one who makes the subject of this research, especially because it stays at the base of any and all civilization. When it comes to workers in the health sector, as an addition to the above mentioned, mental health and psychosocial support, decent working hours, protection of volunteers, and short-term recruits are more important than ever.

Another great point about the health sector is that women are confronting specific difficulties during this pandemic. All-inclusive, they make up more than 70 percent of the wellbeing workforce and they additionally worry about the concern of unpaid work, for example, taking care of kids or old relatives. Health employment and workforce shortages, difficulties in keeping a balance between the public and private health sectors, are only a few of the lesser-known problems in the health system during the COVID-19 pandemic.

An incredible useful reaction of the doctors that were not directly involved in the pandemic, that have other specialties, was giving virtual consultation and advice. And this was the case not only for psychologists but also for family doctors, homeopaths, pediatricians and many others.

The road transport segment is fundamental to social and financial advancement and ensures portability across wards and nations. Pressing activity by governments, the social accomplices and gatherings to street transport gracefully chains – including shippers, beneficiaries, transport purchasers and middle people – will be basic intending to nice work difficulties for these key laborers to tackle the present and future emergencies viably.

While organizations of the sum total of what sizes have been influenced by the pandemic, this phenomenal circumstance has brought about the fast decay of the liquidity and gainfulness of most MSMEs in the business. New limitations (or closures) at border intersections and national state lines or nearby locales negatively affect working conditions as far as holding up times, constrained isolate, compulsory testing, and segregation.

Talking about transportation services, not all SMEs were affected the same. Actually, delivery companies were the ones who hired most in this time of crisis, as e-commerce got even more popular, not only for specific, hard to find items but for groceries and day-to-day things as well.

Conclusions

In Romania, the authorities adopted an advantage of 75% of compensation however close to 75% of the normal pay to guardians who can't work remotely and need to remain at home with kids more youthful than 12 years. The spending change of 17 April gives RON 1.4 billion to this reason.

The Romanian administration adopted on 18 March and distributed on 21 March a crisis statute (OUG) 29/2020 on supporting nearby organizations with regards to the

emergency brought about by the coronavirus, alongside OUG 30/2020 that changes existing guidelines to align them with the current conditions. As indicated by the announcements by the legislature, the bundle of measures introduced on 18 March (counting specialized joblessness and Intervention Fund) speaks to a budgetary exertion of 2% of GDP.

Emergency ordinance 30/2020 additionally allows the state to pay the lowest pay permitted by law to the individuals who can't guarantee specialized joblessness, as independently employed or small scale/family endeavors. The spending change of 17 April gives RON 1.9 billion to this reason. Nevertheless, workers in all sectors got to suffer and were scared of the possible consequences of the economic crisis, even more than of the COVID-19 pandemic.

That being said, in the sectors where teleworking was possible, the situation was better even from a psychological point of view, not only economic. Although the response numbers for the survey are pretty low, they overwhelmingly point in the same direction, regardless of age, marital status, and several children – teleworking is good and many benefits can come from it if you stay positive. (Figure 5)

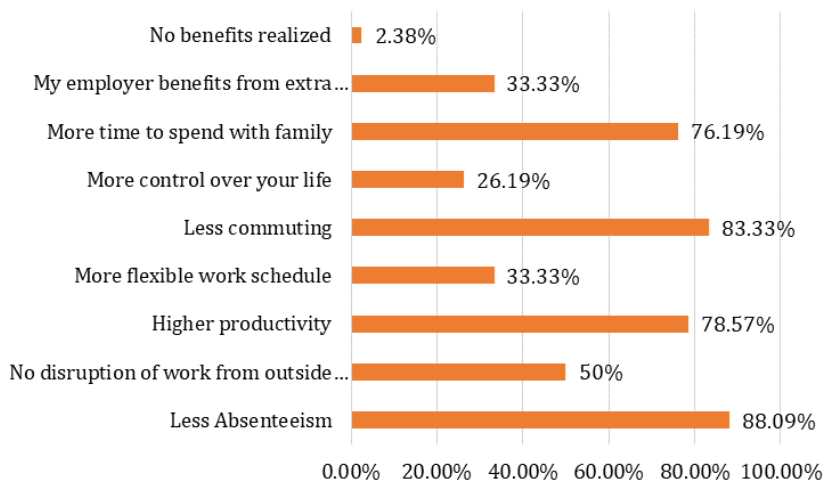


Figure 5. Benefits obtained by teleworking

Authors' representation

In Figure 5, benefits that employees see as coming from teleworking and their levels are detailed. *Less absenteeism* (88.09%) and *less commuting* (83.33%) are considered the most important ones.

Even if it does not make the case of the current research, it is to be said that while people of all ages, occupations and backgrounds struggled to cope with the imposed restrictions, Earth was never better, enjoying a well-deserved vacation from the pollution of all kinds. In fact, after the shock passed, people started to enjoy staying at home as well because they realized that they would not spend this much time doing what they love most if they weren't forced to do so.

In conclusion, the COVID-19 pandemic hurried up a development that would have happened anyway – heavy industrialization and technologizing of all companies in the extractive industry, manufacturing industry, production and supply of electric and thermal energy, gases, hot water and air-conditioned, water distribution; sanitation, waste management, decontamination activities and in constructions, and heavy digitalization of all the others.

The best part of the crisis, besides a happier Earth, is that the workers that kept their jobs and to some extent their salaries unaltered, have found more time to do the things they need and/ or truly enjoy.

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